ISRAEL NATURE
AND PARKS
AUTHORITY

Hula

Nature Reserve

www.parks.org.il | *3639 |

"...lake Semechonitis...is thirty furlongs in breadth and sixty in length; its marshes reach as far as the place Daphne."

-Josephus Flavius, Wars of the Jews 4:1:3

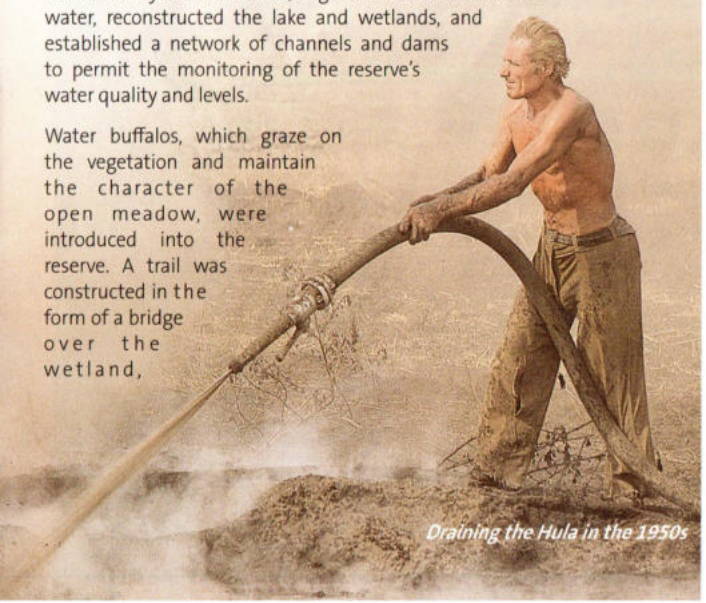
The Hula Valley was at one time the most important resting place for birds migrating from Europe to Africa and back, with tens of thousands of birds making their homes in the lake and wetland here. Many species of rare fish and plants also lived in the Hula Valley, creating a wonderland of flora and fauna. Immediately following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the government decided to drain the wetlands and lake (which covered more than 15,000 acres at the time) and convert them into cultivated fields. The task was entrusted to the Jewish National Fund, which began to drain the area in 1951. This was the largest engineering project undertaken by the young state.

Profoundly disturbed by the massive scale of the enterprise, scientists and nature lovers in Israel waged a vigorous battle to conserve at least part of the landscape of the lake and wetland. Although the idea of conserving a swamp sounded rather bizarre in 1951, the Jewish National Fund was convinced of its merit and agreed to set aside 1075 acres of the lake as a nature reserve. Because of a water shortage, the area slated for conservation was subsequently cut back to 800 acres. These 800 acres became the foundation for the first nature reserve in Israel, which was officially declared in 1964.

Very quickly however, it became apparent that the act of declaring the nature reserve was no guarantee that its world of flora and fauna would remain undisturbed. Water escaped beyond the boundaries of the reserve through holes in the lake's dikes, and during the summer, the soil in the reserve dried out almost completely. High-quality water was also difficult to obtain. Agricultural development near the reserve, and the concomitant effects of fertilizers and pesticides also took their toll. As a result of these factors, the flora and fauna of many habitats disappeared from the reserve. It became clear that a major restoration project would be required, and in 1971, the Nature Reserves Authority, now the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA), committed itself to the project.

The authority built new dikes, dug a reservoir to collect fresh water, reconstructed the lake and wetlands, and established a network of channels and dams to permit the monitoring of the reserve's water quality and levels.

Water buffalos, which graze on the vegetation and maintain the character of the open meadow, were introduced into the reserve. A trail was constructed in the form of a bridge over the wetland,



Draining the Hula in the 1950s

Water buffalo

and lookouts were set up from which visitors can observe the birds. After seven years of preparation, the Hula reserve was opened to the public in 1978. Some water plants reestablished themselves, and over 200 species of waterfowl now flock to the Hula.

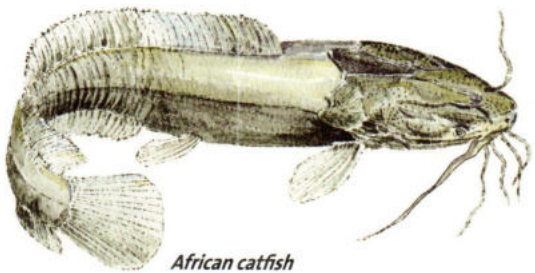
In the spring of 1994, another stage in the campaign to restore the Hula wetland was completed: the flooding of 250 acres of peat soil located some two kilometers north of the reserve. This area would flood during every stormy winter, because the peat soil had sunk below its original level. Allowing the area to flood intentionally improved the quality of water that flows to the Sea of Galilee. Now the water "rests" in the Hula, which allows organic materials that would otherwise flow into the Sea of Galilee and pollute it, the chance to sink. The new pond has already become an additional body of water for the birds to enjoy as well as a major tourist attraction, and has helped restore the Hula Valley to its former status as an important migration and breeding site.

Tour of the Reserve

The tour begins at the visitor center, with an exhibition documenting the history of the Hula Valley. Visitors learn about the mammals, birds, and flora that once inhabited the Hula, but disappeared from the landscape. A diorama showcases the more than 50 animals that now make their homes in the reserve. The visitor center also has an audiovisual program about the draining of the Hula Valley and the landscape of the reserve.

The kilometer-and-a-half-long trail through the reserve leaves from the visitor center and returns there; see the map for the main attractions. Near the visitor center is an observation point with a lovely view of the reserve and the Hula Valley. The Golan Heights are to the east and the Naftali Mountains ridge is to the west. On a clear day, the town of Metulla is visible to the north.

From the observation point, the trail continues to a small bridge that crosses a channel. In the spring and summer, you can admire the white blossoms of the water lilies (*Nymphaea alba*) under the bridge. This species was returned to the reserve in 1994. Yellow pond lilies, aquatic plants with large yellow flowers, bloom in the pool opposite. Neumayer's nuthatches (*Sitta neumayer*) and squacco herons (*Ardeola ralloides*) can sometimes be spotted on the large leaves of the floating yellow pond lilies. The trail continues along one of the dikes of the reserve. Here visitors can become acquainted with typical riverbank vegetation, such as tamarisks (*Tamarix jordanis*), blackberry (*Rubus sanctus*) brambles, and willows (*Salix acmophylla*). Flora that have "invaded" the reserve can also be seen here, including the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*) and the chinaberry tree (*Melia azedarach*). If you peer into the water on the western side of the dike, you will see ruler-straight lines of yellow iris, a rare and beautiful plant that unfurls its large pale-yellow blossoms in early summer.



African catfish

Yellow pond lily

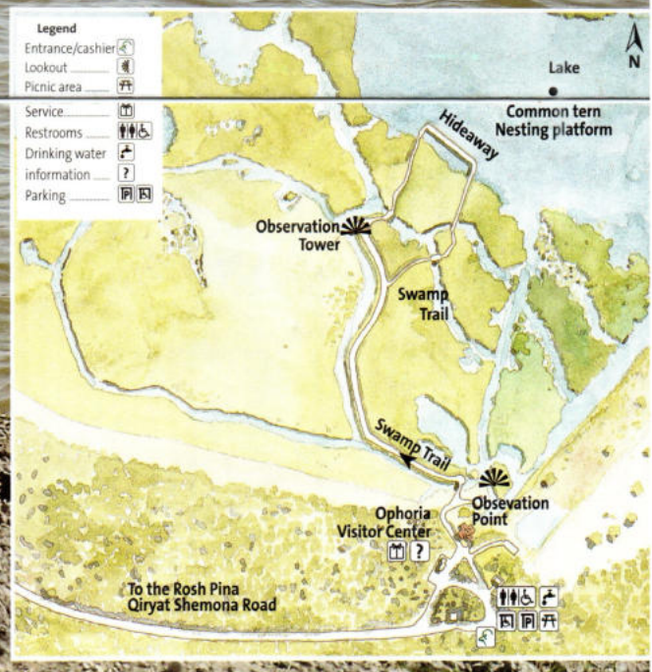
After walking a few more minutes, turn right onto a long wooden bridge. This is the Swamp Trail, a lovely path over the water that leads into the heart of the papyrus thicket. The Egyptians manufactured their famous papyrus paper from this plant. As you proceed along the Swamp Trail, you can observes a number of other interesting plants, such as a species of nettle, *Urtica pilulifera*, which grows only in the Hula, and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), which has mauve blossoms from spring until early autumn. Many swamp turtles live in the water and enjoy sunning themselves on the rocks and other protruding objects. You will inevitably see catfish here as well. These large fish are known for their catlike whiskers. The African catfish population has grown dramatically since the draining of the Hula wetland; they are now the dominant fish in the reserve.

Midway along the Swamp Trail is the Hideaway, a blind from which visitors can observe the birds in the lake without disturbing them. Many species of birds make their home in the lake, each with its own habits. Some birds can be spotted easily; others are rather bashful. To observe certain species, you will have to watch for them patiently through binoculars.

During migration seasons, many species of ducks visit the reserve, including teal, northern shoveler, and mallard, on their long journey from Europe to Africa. Among the many birds found in the reserve are gray herons (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), which stand motionless at the water's edge waiting for a fish to swim by, and great cormorants (*Podiceps cristatus*) that rest on top of poles and between the branches of trees and can be identified by their dazzling black color. Thousand of pelicans swim serenely in the pond; the thrilling site of a large flock of pelicans taking off in the early morning is unforgettable.

The observation tower is the last stop on the tour of the reserve. It affords a wonderful view of the whole reserve.

Although the trail leads through only a fraction of the Hula Nature Reserve, it affords a view of most of it. A large portion of the reserve is closed to the public, allowing the Israel Nature and Parks Authority to conserve a wide variety of habitats.



Little egret

Swamp turtle

Coot

Great Cormorant

Moorhen

Pelicans

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Dear Visitor:

- Please remember that the animals and plants are the permanent residents of the reserve and that we are its temporary guests. The rules of the reserve are designed to ensure that you and future visitors will have a pleasant visit.
- A shaded picnic area is located at the entrance to the reserve. Eating and drinking are allowed only in the picnic area; please do not bring food into the reserve.
- Please do not disturb anything; each stone plant and animal is an integral part of the reserve.
- Do not take anything from the reserve or leave anything behind.
- Please do not pick or gather reeds or any other plants.
- Please stay on the public trails.
- Do not make excessive noise that will frighten away the animals.
- Fishing in the reserve is prohibited.
- Pets are prohibited in the reserve.
- Please keep the reserve clean; place all garbage in the garbage cans.

Visiting Hours:

Sunday to Thursday 8:00–17:00 (last entrance 16:00)
Fridays and holiday eves: 8:00–15:00 (last entrance 14:00)

- Group attendance at the presentation "Oforia" must be reserved in advance: tel: 04-6937069
- Binoculars may be rented at the Visitor Center.
- Guided tours for groups and activities for student groups may be arranged in advance

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Production: Adi Greenbaum;
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Nearby Sites:

Tel Hazor National Park
about 10 minutes' drive

You are here

'Iyyon Stream National Park
25 minutes' drive

Senir (Hatsbani) Stream Nature Reserve
about 25 minutes' drive

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